

Russia and Regime Security

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From Crisis to Crisis: Russia's Security Policy Under Putin

Aglaya Snetkov, Zurich

Abstract

This article considers Russia's more assertive foreign policy stance during the Ukraine crisis and now in terms of conducting airstrikes in Syria in support of the Assad regime. It suggests that these foreign policy-choices should be interpreted in light of questions of domestic security and how these foreign actions relate to the Putin regime's wider political project for Russia. In this way, the regime's previous concern about the taboo on the use of force abroad has gradually been eroded in conjunction with its shift to articulating a more patriotic and anti-Western political project following the popular protests against the regime in 2011/12.

Russia's security strategy is once again a hot topic for the international community and foreign policy analysts. This is mostly due to the Ukraine crisis and, most recently, Russia's military operations in Syria in support of the Assad regime. The reaction of analysts and observers to Russia's stance on Syria and Ukraine highlights the need to go beyond critique of Russian policies and towards a deeper understanding of what is driving the Putin regime's security strategy, so that the next "crisis" involving Russia is not met with such surprise. From this perspective, two key but often neglected dimensions to understanding the Putin regime as an international actor are, one, to forget about the artificial separation between domestic and foreign policy, and, two, to consider the interplay between core and relatively fixed principles at the heart of Russia's security policy and Moscow's short-term often reactive responses to individual crises.

Taking this into account, this article sides with those who argue that one persuasive way to read Russia's recent assertive and aggressive security policy is to focus on the rise of anti-Westernism and patriotism adopted by the regime. It is suggested that this shift to emotive patriotism and emphasis on creating a national identity vis-à-vis the West as an Other, has also evolved alongside a gradual process of sweeping away prior taboos on the use of force in the worldview of the Putin regime that has conditioned its inclinations towards power projection, first domestically, then regionally and now internationally. Indeed, the sweeping away of the taboo on the use of force also seems to signal that the Putin regime has put the promotion and support of like-minded and friendly regimes abroad, both regionally and internationally, ahead of its stated economic ambitions, now curtailed under sanctions, be these domestic modernisation and economic diversification, the future development of the Eurasian Economic Union or engagement with the global economy in terms of promoting foreign direct investment in Russia and general opening up of the Russian economy.

Analysing Russia's Security Agenda

Security policy-makers in Russia do not seem to follow the neat separation between foreign, regional and domestic agendas and policy-spaces, which are often explicit or implicit in analysis of Russian security policy. The Russian security imaginary or worldview tends to transcend such simple divisions. All dimensions of security policy—a policy-area encompassing aspects of a wide range of other policy-areas (economics, societal etc.)—are tightly interlinked with Putin's wider agenda for Russia more broadly. Security policy, therefore, cannot be investigated in isolation from wider developments in Russia. Concerns about the threat posed from foreign sources, such as Euromaidan or the Arab Spring, to domestic regime security. Or, how domestic political developments, such as the 2011–2 electoral cycle protest, shape Russia's foreign policy positions on the validity of intervention against the Assad regime in Syria or on global norms and the regulation of cyberspace. Within this assemblage of policy issues, fear of domestic instability within Russia itself, and the possibility the protests could succeed in toppling the regime overshadow all others, however unlikely most analysts consider this prospect to be. Hence, triangulating what is going on inside Russia (and the regime's reading of this) in many cases is maybe as important as the particular details of the regional and international security issue or crisis under discussion in accounting for the Putin regime's foreign policy position.

Furthermore, in interpreting the Putin regime a combination of longitudinal and immediate crisis analysis is needed. Rather than a static construct, Putin's political project is instead a highly changeable national programme, which has evolved through several different iterations since his first term in office. In this period, this national project has moved from seeking to rebuild Russia from a proclaimed position of weakness in the early 2000s towards a more patriotic and anti-Western ideal of the Russian state since 2012. This evolution, however, is not the product of a single linear strategy, but has been influenced and shaped by reactive responses to circum-

stances over the course of the last fifteen years. Hence, reacting to firstly the global War on Terror and latterly to Georgia 2008 and Euromaidan, the Putin regime has framed its relationship to the West as initially one of friendship to the current characterisation of enmity respectively. While this framing tends to be altered to a degree in reaction to events and crises, below the surface certain fundamentals, habits and red lines within the Putin regime's security policy have remained consistently in place: Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, concern over the West's policy towards the post-Soviet region, distrust of liberal interventions and externally-sponsored regime change.

Hence, in seeking to account for Russia's policy towards a particular crisis or issue, such as the Ukraine or Syria crisis, it is therefore critical to consider both how this relates to the current iteration of the regime's political programme and its ad hoc priorities, but also to this wider set of enduring concerns underlying Putin's wider national project since he came to power. Indeed, this interplay between a current specific policy-issue and the fundamentals that the regime is built on, has been a trademark of Putin's presidencies. On several occasions, a particular security issue has come to play a 'special' role within Putin's wider political project, examples being Chechnya in the early 2000s as the rationale for restoring strong central control, or the Iraq war and Libya as illustrative of the deceit of Western states. In recent years, individual security crises have come to function as markers in the sand for the evolution in Russia's increasing willingness to use force outside of its borders, from Georgia in 2008 to Crimea and Ukraine since 2014 and most recently in terms of air strikes in support of the Assad regime in Syria.

Patriotism, Security and the Ukraine and Syria Crises

The evolution in Russia's security agenda since 2000 and its view on the use of force is related to the concurrent evolution in who or what has been deemed as the main threat to the regime and nation. Over the last decade, national- or state-security has come to be usurped by concerns about regime security. This is evident in the mass domestic securitisations of actors that sought to challenge or oppose the regime's legitimacy to rule, which has gathered pace since 2012. This has run parallel to worsening relations with the West in foreign affairs. With these two tracks—internal and external—fused in the promotion of a patriotic agenda and the calls of greater self-reliance, moves that are intended to counter these domestic and foreign threats to regime security at one and the same time.

As opposed to his first term as President, upon his return to the role in 2012, the Putin regime appeared

to lack a coherent and clear internal logic and sense of direction in terms of its national project for the next 6 years. They attempted to articulate a project reconciling discourses about economic modernisation and Russia as a great power, as seen by the political capital invested in the Eurasian Economic Union project and talk of greater interconnections with the global economy. However, the result was an incoherent kaleidoscope of policy-initiatives and claims about Russia's future direction. At the same time, the Putin regime also took steps to securitise and counteract any actors or processes deemed as a challenge to their ruling legitimacy, driven by the shock of widespread anti-regime protests around the 2011 Duma and 2012 Presidential election. What is often missed by global analysts in this context, is that these initial securitising moves were focused on the domestic Russian space, and not counteracting Western power and principles abroad. This period saw the trial of the punk band Pussy riot, a more punitive approach to NGOs and non-governmental groups operating inside Russia, a tightening of anti-LGBT regulations, and an emphasis on controlling the Russian information space. Indeed, during the initial years of his third term, many analysts began to question the popular interpretation of Putin as an astute foreign policy strategist, able to navigate and out-manoeuvre other leaders in the choppy waters of international security. This seemed to go hand-in-hand with a view that Russia was a falling power, constrained in its international role by its poor domestic economic outlook and lacking a sense of purpose and direction as to what it represents.

However, the international crises in Syria and Ukraine have altered this impression, becoming symbolic in galvanising Putin's new patriotic program for Russia, which has not only resulted in major popularity gains for the president himself among the Russian electorate, but also the reassertion of a more aggressive role for Russia in both regional and international affairs. Indeed, these crises have become central features in articulating this new iteration of the Putin project. With the Ukraine crisis, the Putin regime has put forward their own very particular historical discourses, elaborating a notion of nationalism more centred on ethnicity than that promoted previously. They have sought to utilize the historical precedent that certain parts of Ukraine were once located within the Russian Empire, with this mode of thought expanded into a wider image of the historical memory of 'Novorossiia'. While the theme of Russia's responsibility to protect Russian-speaking communities abroad has been present within Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the USSR, its usage as justification for the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, amounts

to a much more traditional understanding of Russian nationalism and patriotism. Terminology seeped in the language of biopolitics—supporting Russian compatriots abroad—came to dominate Russian official discourse on Ukraine, and has also been drawn upon in reinterpreting Russia's position on the doctrine of Responsibility-to-Protect, potentially opening the space for justifying further Russian adventures in other countries with large-“Russian” populations.

In this regard, the Ukraine crisis came to play a similar symbolic role in the development of Russian official security discourse and agenda, as that played by NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo, the second Chechen campaign, the Iraq war, the colour revolutions and debates around NATO expansion in the 2000s. Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine and the diplomatic and later military support of Assad regime in Syria, a clear focus has been on re-inserting patriotism as a way to solidify the balance between tackling security concerns and ensuring the regime's popularity. This has become increasingly significant in the face of a worsening economic situation. If in 2012, Putin's national idea and direction for Russia seemed incoherent and stumbling, the shape of Putin 3.0 has now been consolidated around the discursive lynchpin of patriotism and the regime's responsibility to prevent Russia from collapsing into disorder as domestic and foreign enemies would like to see.

The crisis in both Syria and Ukraine have been framed by the Putin regime in terms of a choice between order and disorder, with the image of disorder in Ukraine and Syria said to have been provoked from afar, and contrasted with an image of Russia as a place of stability, and freedom from foreign agitation. As Coalson (2014) outlines, official Russian state-television presented a picture whereby ‘Russia is an oasis of calm good governance in a world of chaos. Fascism is on the march in the world and Russia must be vigilant. The motif of “Europe in flames”’ (Coalson 2014). In addition, the sources of disorder in both cases were presented in terms of highlighting the potential danger that agitators set on bringing the Putin regime down face to order in Russia. Goode and Laruelle (2014) have noted that ‘Russia seemed anxious to prevent the type of democrats-and-nationalists alliance that brought down Yanukovich’, and thus have come out in support of the Assad regime from the threat posed by an international community willing to sanction regime change in the Syria, and elsewhere.

Putin's third term has also seen an increased fear of independent voices and civil society actors seeking to change national regimes from within. Such concerns had become more noticeable from the period of the ‘colour revolutions’ onwards, and the events in Ukraine

and the on-going attempt at regime-change in Syria have become symbols of what the regime both fears the most and condemns as against international law. In February 2014, countering the position that the Euro-maidan protests that saw Yanukovich flee the country were a legitimate expression of democratic accountability to the people, Medvedev outlined that: ‘Some of our foreign, Western partners think otherwise [that it was legitimate]. This is some kind of aberration of perception when people call legitimate what is essentially the result of an armed mutiny.’ Indeed, within Russian official discourse, the image of the protest movement in Ukraine was presented as that of a West-sponsored strategy. The depiction of the protests as being driven by the extremists and orchestrated from abroad by the West, was presented as evidence of its illegitimacy, whereby the protestors could not be considered an authentic representation of the Ukrainian people, but rather as actors who had been bought-off by the US and EU.

A similar position was taken in the case of Syria, and more broadly in Russia's response to the Arab Spring, whereby local protests and uprisings were de-legitimised. The overthrow of Gaddafi and the subsequent insecurity in Libya was presented as evidence of the grave mistake of externally sponsored regime-change. With supporting the Assad regime a necessary policy to ensure the future survival of Syria in the face of a failed and dithering policy on the part of West.

In both crises, the West was depicted as a revisionist and aggressive actor, eager to support an illegitimate and illegal armed mutiny that would perpetuate chaos and disorder in these states. In this way, both have become the stage for a tug-of-war over who can set international perception of legitimacy, legality and order in spaces proximate to Russia. With the Putin regime positioning itself as a defender of established and somewhat autocratic regimes against revisionism of populist protests said to be propagated Western backers.

Critically, not only have both the Ukraine and Syrian crises become central to the formation of Putin's program/ideological project, but they have also become events that have broken through the regime's remaining concerns about the taboo on the use of force abroad. Hence, a number of security practices and methods initially developed and deployed domestically in the North Caucasus have been transplanted into Russia's external policy. The use of hybrid warfare—the blurring of interventionism and a principled stance of non-interventionism and policies of war and peace—previously reserved for the domestic sphere have now been exported onto the regional and global arenas. Furthermore, the non-identification of combatants, the repeated denials on the part of the regime and its security apparatus of

their presence and/or the existence of operations by Russian troops and equipment, a high tolerance for everyday insecurity on the ground leading to civilian casualties, all of which have perplexed many foreign policy analysts were in evidence more than a decade previous in the North Caucasus. As was the use of information warfare, the attempts to control public debate and access to news sources about on-the-ground developments, in order to primarily win support for and seek legitimacy of these policies from the Russian public, but also secondarily to influence the perceptions of outside observers.

Conclusion

In 2015, it seems that the Putin regime's main security priority is countering the proclaimed threat posed by an unholy alliance between 'anti-regime'—and thus 'anti-Russian'—groups and the West. In response, it has adopted an aggressive and confrontational conservative-nationalist and anti-Western discourse as a way of solidifying an increasingly disgruntled and shaky domestic order, an aim which also extends to foreign affairs. This strategy has found high-profile manifestation in the regime's decision to annex the Crimea in early 2014, the ongoing threat of further Russian military actions

in eastern Ukraine, and the recent air strikes in Syria in the face of wide-spread criticism, including from relatively friendly states such as Turkey. Whilst Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime may well represent an attempt to shift the conversation away from Ukraine and on-going questions of its role in Eastern Ukraine, and could even be interpreted as attempt at highlighting common purpose with the West in combatting Islamic State, it is also illustrative of the fact that the Putin regime is no longer shy when it comes to using force to back up its foreign policy positions. Yet, Russia's willingness to use force both in Ukraine and in Syria has caught the vast majority of policy practitioners and analysts off guard, and, indeed, the Kremlin had until relatively recently been very reluctant to countenance such external military actions. However, in hindsight the signs of a gradual erosion of what was previously serious concern about violating the taboo of external use of force were there from 2008 onwards. This also highlights the difficulty and complexity in interpreting the future foreign policy actions of the Putin regime, without reference to the prevailing state of affairs in its domestic context.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Russia and the West: The Longer View

Keir Giles, London

Abstract

Far from being a "current crisis", confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine is indicative of the deep-seated and long-term incompatibility of each side's strategic priorities. Pretence at strategic partnership with Moscow was only possible while Russia was in a position of relative weakness, and the perceived threat to Russia by the West was hypothetical rather than immediate. Now that Moscow feels itself both under greater threat, and more capable of taking action to address that threat, the long-term outlook is for a return to normal in relations with Russia: namely, continued conflict and confrontation.

New Threat, New Capabilities

Amid the shock and alarm felt in Europe and beyond at Russian actions in Ukraine, there has been much speculation over underlying Russian motivations and

the potential for future action. But commentary on the subject, even sometimes by well-informed experts, has a tendency to be short-termist in nature and to fail to take into account longer trends in Russian security thinking.

A key requirement for assessing these trends is recognition that the crisis around Ukraine is part of a wider confrontation between Russia and the West, which has persisted at varying degrees of intensity since the fall of the Soviet Union—despite periods when the West as a whole refused to recognise that any conflict of strategic interest with Russia still existed. After a period where this confrontation lay relatively dormant, conflict in Ukraine represents a much more assertive and confident Russian foreign policy: assertive in defending its interests, and confident in the leverage and power which it enjoys to do so. These new characteristics result from the culmination of two important trends in the Russian view of itself and the world. These are, first, a greater and more urgent perception of threat, whether real or imagined, to Russia's own security; and second, a recognition that Russia itself has regained sufficient strength, military and otherwise, to assert itself.

Both of these trajectories have been visible since Russia's financial fortunes began to change with the influx of vastly increased energy revenues after 2005, but they became especially marked following the Western intervention in Libya in 2011. One reason is that Western actions over the last two decades have steadily increased Russian fears of what Moscow perceives as US-led expansionism and imperialism. These actions affect Russian security in ways which are not always apparent to Western policymakers. One root cause of this is a Russian perception that the West's habit of fostering and facilitating regime change by means of "colour revolutions", indiscriminately and with little regard for the consequences, may have Moscow as its eventual target.

Threat Perception

The fear that the West is considering bringing about regime change in Russia does not stand up to objective scrutiny, but it appears deep-rooted among a broad sector of the Russian security elite. It has been accentuated in the past decade by—as Moscow sees it—an increasing tempo of unrestrained and irresponsible interventions by the West with the intention of regime change, leaving chaos and disorder in their wake. Mismanagement of the aftermath of Western invasion of Iraq in 2003 created conditions for the rise of ISIL. Western action in Libya in 2011 contributed to replacing a stable regime with an ungovernable space and source of far-reaching instability and weapons proliferation. Western objectives in Syria threaten to do the same.

The notion that Russia is faced with an existential threat—even when that threat is imperceptible from outside Russia—has multiple and complex origins. Some of these are permanent and persistent, for example the idea of vulnerability of Russia's borders, which leads to

the conviction that in order to protect itself Russia must exert control far beyond them. This continuing perception feeds into the current portrayal by Russia of NATO enlargement as a threat. Regardless of NATO's intent, it presents a menace simply by "approaching Russia's borders". This is also a factor in Russian perception of instability in the Middle East as being a much more immediate and local threat to Russia by comparison with the European view of a relatively distant problem which only affects the homeland through generating uncontrollable flows of illegal immigrants. By Russian geographical standards, as expressed by one senior Russian general, the Middle East is "*sovsem ryadom*"—right next door.

Thus the prospect of destabilisation even closer to home, in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014, would have been of even more acute and direct concern in Moscow. Even without the accompanying disorder, the threat of the "loss" of Ukraine to the West posed an immediate military problem: it appears to have been considered plausible in Moscow that this constituted an immediate danger of losing the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol, together with the often-overlooked supporting infrastructure scattered across the Crimean peninsula, to NATO. According to Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, the consequences could be even more far-reaching: "Americans are trying to involve the Russian Federation in interstate military conflict, to facilitate the change of power by way of using the events in Ukraine, and ultimately to carve up our country."

Alternative Reality

Debate as to whether this belief is genuinely held or not, while important, is in a way not pertinent: it is expressed so persistently, at all levels of Russian government and society, that perception equates to reality. This is particularly the case following the isolation of Russian media space after the beginning of the crisis around Ukraine, which means that large sections of the Russian population no longer have access to outside sources of information to counterbalance the Russian state narratives of a nation under siege and an impending hour of national crisis. Intensive militarisation—sometimes referred to directly as mobilisation—is now pervading Russian society, stoked by unending leadership rhetoric of war, confrontation and threat, and blanket military coverage on TV. According to former Estonian Ambassador to the Russian Federation Jüri Luik, the Russian narrative of war is "instrumentalising the population and putting it on a mental war footing", not only by tapping into the traditional Russian narrative of victimhood over centuries, but also by engendering "a heroic feeling that now is the time of risk". Furthermore, analysis of Russian security thinking shows not only this asymmetry of

threat perception, but also a complete divergence with the West in terms of notions of how and when military force should be used to counter those threats.

With Russia's determination to resist the West thus resting on a foundation of regime insecurity, actions which appear to the West to be aggressive can in fact be rooted in Russian defensive concerns. This is an additional factor in Russia protecting its interests in ways which continue to take the West by surprise.

But none of the above should be read as suggesting novelty in underlying Russian security thinking. Throughout Russian, and then Soviet, and then Russian history, the West has always been seen as a destabilising force which must be resisted. What is new is a more direct and immediate sense of threat to Russia itself, and Russia's confidence and ability to actually do something about it. A key difference between Syria and Ukraine, and previous confrontations where Russia did not play such an active role, is that Russia now feels sufficiently powerful by comparison to the West—both in military, and political, and diplomatic terms—to mount active countermeasures.

“Russia is Back”

Syria represented a tipping point after Libya. In 2012–13 the West appeared intent on toppling another regime for their own purposes, with all the damaging and destabilising consequences that would have entailed. But adroit manipulation by Russia of confrontation with Syria over the use of chemical weapons averted the possibility of imminent military action.

This represented a Russian gamble in testing its power and influence by standing up to the West. Western intervention in Syria, after strenuous opposition from Moscow, would have destroyed all Russian political credibility. But instead, by facing down and containing the West, Russia gained legitimacy in some quarters as the protector of the status quo, sovereignty and stability. This presented a major diplomatic and geopolitical turning point. It supported the Russian assessment that the U.S. can be manipulated back from the brink of military action or intervention. The powerful message sent to the regimes around the world which are concerned about confrontation with the West was: “Russia is back and can help save you”. And Russia confirmed for itself that outmanoeuvring the West is now possible. This contributed to the confidence with which initial actions against Ukraine were undertaken—and subsequently, the seizure of Crimea validated the post-Georgia view that Russian direct military action can also be successful, and can lead to long-term strategic gain through presenting the world with a *fait accompli*.

Success in Syria also supported the notion that Russia is by rights a world power which in terms of influence approaches par with the U.S. This latter point is a significant factor in Russian thinking regarding the West, which is not always perceived there. Many Russian actions in the last 20 years can be seen as efforts to rebuild the national status as a great power that was lost in 1991. In this context, it needs to be remembered that in effect, Russia's entire national history is as a world-class power—with the exception of the traumatic last two decades. Thus, the question of status and self-perception needs always to be borne in mind when considering Russian foreign policy, especially toward the U.S. and its closest allies. The currently suspended discussions over BMD, for example, and the insistence that no regional security issue can be addressed without the involvement of Russia, reveal the significance of Russian insistence on being treated as an equal.

Return to Relative Strength

Recent developments have thus heightened the sense of urgency and threat for Russian security planners. Meanwhile, while Russian intentions and security concerns have not changed, Russia's capability to address them has done so drastically.

The fact that Russia was able to use large numbers of special operations forces (SOF) swiftly and effectively to seize control of Crimea, and subsequently to wage an ongoing low-level campaign in eastern Ukraine involving long-term mobilisation of its conventional forces, is a pointer to the other key element of the new Russian approach to confrontation: the recognition that Russia is now in a position to exercise a much more assertive foreign policy than in the recent past thanks to its own relative strength. One element of this is the unprecedented and expensive overhaul and rearmament of Russia's Armed Forces, which began after the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008 and continues today. The fact that the Russian troops that went to work in Ukraine were entirely unrecognisable from the forces which entered Georgia just seven years earlier caused surprise and consternation among those Western defence communities that had not been paying attention.

For the time being, the Russian Armed Forces are continuing to improve in capability despite economic challenges. This is due both to the long-planned and continuing reform and rearmament program, and to actual combat and tactical experience in and near Ukraine, to which a high proportion of Russia's Ground Troops has now been exposed thanks to troop rotations. In effect, in the words of one experienced analyst, the Russian military has benefited from a “rolling 18-month live fire exercise” on the Ukrainian border, a luxury far beyond

the imagination of Western militaries. Meanwhile, Russia's air force benefits from intensive practice in Syria, with the added bonus of testing itself against NATO air defences by way of incursions into Turkish airspace.

Outlook

But the Ukraine campaign overall is far more than a military operation. Successful coordination of military movements and action with other measures in the political, economic and especially information domains, are the result of strenuous efforts by the Putin administration over preceding years to harness other levers of state power to act in a coordinated manner. Russia's attempt at this whole of government approach to managing conflict is embodied in the National Defence Control Centre in central Moscow, where a wide range of different government ministries and agencies—including those responsible for energy, the economy, ecology,

and more—are brought together under the leadership of the General Staff.

Both of these trends are continuing: Russia continues to present itself as being under approaching threat, and to mobilise to address that threat. The responses, even if viewed by Moscow as defensive measures, are likely to have severe consequences for Russia's neighbours. At the time of writing, attention continues to be focused on the Baltic states as the most likely victims of Russian assertiveness. But the delicate balancing act by Belarus should also be watched closely: despite key differences with the situation in Ukraine, there are enough factors in common that Russian hostile action to protect its interests becomes more likely with each step by President Lukashenka towards rapprochement with the West. Europe's next crisis should not take the West by surprise through ignorance of the fundamental Russian security perceptions which prompt Moscow to action.

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ANALYSIS

Putin's Spies and Security Men: His Strongest Allies, His Greatest Weakness

Mark Galeotti, New York

Abstract

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia's numerous intelligence and security agencies have regained the powers, confidence, impunity and central role they lost in the 1980s and 1990s. However, while apparently highly effective instruments of Russian policy, especially in a new age of "non-linear" political warfare and covert contestation, they may actually represent a vulnerability. Not only do they contribute to Russia's declining global reputation, they appear to be modulating the information they present to him to match his expectations. As a result, they encourage a dangerously confrontational and aggressive foreign policy.

Under Vladimir Putin—himself a notoriously proud veteran of the Soviet KGB and a former director of the Federal Security Service (FSB, *Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*)—the intelligence and security agencies have become central instruments of policy. They not only secure his position, but as Russia develops a model of 'non-linear' political war that blends military, political, economic and covert operations they are being used for a growing range of activities abroad, from managing pseudo-insurgents in the Donbas to running divisive political operations in Europe.

They are trusted and favoured, even indulged. Although in 2015 it emerged that even they were having to absorb the 10% budgetary cuts previously demanded of other government agencies in the face of a sustained fiscal crisis—hitherto they had largely avoided any rounds of belt-tightening under Putin—nonetheless they continue to receive favourable treatment. However, it is less clear quite how and how far they influence policy and also whether, ultimately, they are an asset or a problem for Putin in his campaign to restore

what he sees as Russia's rightful place in the world and, by extension, his own place in history.

Spooks and Security Policemen

Under the Soviets, one agency, the Committee of State Security (KGB, *Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*), handled both domestic security and the lion's share of external intelligence. It was dissolved with the end of the USSR and broken into numerous separate agencies, but an array of reforms and redesignations in the 1990s left Russia with an intelligence and security community which looked much more pluralistic than in Soviet times, yet which in function terms largely mirrors the capacities of the past. The main domestic security agency is the FSB, which also is the main cybersecurity arm after it swallowed most of the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI, *Federalnoe agestvo pravitelstvennoi svyazi i informatsii*) in 2003. The Federal Guard Service (FSO, *Federalnaya sluzhba okhrany*) is charged with the physical security of the president, other key figures and government facilities including the Kremlin.

Espionage is primarily the responsibility of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR, *Sluzhba vneshnogo razvedyvatelnoe*) and military intelligence, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU, *Glavnoe razvedyvatelnoe upravlenie*) of the General Staff. The SVR restored capacities lost in the 1980s and 1990s: a 2010 assessment from Britain's MI5 counter-intelligence agency, for example, warned that "the threat from Russian espionage continues to be significant and is similar to the Cold War" and "the number of Russian intelligence officers in London [was] at the same level as in Soviet times." Likewise, the GRU has maintained an active and aggressive stance, despite serious political challenges to its status after the 2008 Georgian War, when it was deemed to have underperformed. Under a new and capable director, and with the Kremlin looking for an agency able to combine classic espionage, cooperation with gangsters and other non-state instruments, and also special forces pyrotechnics, the GRU—which also controls the *Spetsnaz* special forces—has roared back into favour.

However, in practice, it is important to note that the distinction between domestic and external activities is often blurred. In particular, the FSB has been allowed to run operations abroad since 2003, and in 2006 it was formally authorised to conduct assassinations of enemies of the state. Beyond that, though, it also monitors dissidents abroad and foreign support for anti-government movements and individuals inside Russia, as well as increasingly conducts "active measures"—political operations—in both post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, and further afield in Europe.

The plethora of security agencies, which also include many with a more domestic focus, from the Ministry of

Internal Affairs (MVD, *Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del*) to Federal Narcotics Control Service (FSKN, *Federalnaya sluzhba po kontrolyu za oborotom narkotikov*), do nonetheless share certain distinctive characteristics:

- Their responsibilities overlap to an extent unusual in the West, not least to encourage multiple and competitive perspectives. This is especially visible today in Crimea, where FSB, GRU, SVR and other agencies (including the MVD) all operate, often in parallel—or even at cross purposes.
- In part as a result, they show a propensity for turf wars, not just for funding and access to the president but for simple survival, especially evident in the disbandment and dismemberment of FAPSI in 2003. In 2007, for example, a widespread struggle erupted, primarily between the FSB and FSKN, that required Putin's personal intervention to end, and which led to high-level dismissals.
- All place an emphasis on active operations: these are agencies which are designed and often encouraged to do more than just gather and analyse information. This has also led to a particular connection with organized crime, regarded as especially useful instruments for not only collection operations.
- Their officers tend to be not only relatively nationalistic—hardly unusual for members of the intelligence community—but in the author's opinion and experience also hold a "wartime" mindset that emphasizes a zero-sum vision of the world and a bias towards action. Believing that Russia faces a genuine, even existential threat, they feel that inaction is tantamount to defeat.
- All these agencies suffer from endemic corruption, a product of a lack of effective and transparent oversight, a permissive environment in which this is often seen as a perk of the job, the ability to use both the information and coercive capacities at their disposal, and also prolonged contact with criminals as assets.

Putin's Assets?

The security and intelligence agencies are undoubtedly significant players within the Russian bureaucratic apparatus and often appear as, if not more significant within policy debates than notionally more important ministries. Unconfirmed but pervasive and plausible reports, for example, suggest that while FSB director Alexander Bortnikov, his predecessor Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Presidential Chief of Staff—and KGB veteran—Sergei Ivanov all played a key role in the decision to invade Crimea in 2014 (possibly also along with SVR director Mikhail Fradkov, or even perhaps former Russian Railways chair, Putin ally and former KGB officer Vladimir Yakunin), Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and possibly Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu did not.

More generally, the so-called ‘Chekists’ (a term for members of the intelligence community, after the first Soviet political police, the *Cheka*) are disproportionately heavily represented within the top echelons of the political and economic elite. These include not just Sergei Ivanov and Security Council chairman Nikolai Patrushev, but also figures from state-owned oil corporation Rosneft’s chairman Igor Sechin (once of the GRU) to presumed KGB veteran Sergei Naryshkin, chair of the State Duma.

Quite how far they may shape policy, though, is hard to ascertain. They do not by any means represent a single, unified bloc. They are divided by numerous institutional, factional and personal rivalries, even if they do generally share a personal loyalty to Putin. They also broadly share in his nationalist and conservative worldview and his sense that Russia must assert its place in the world or face marginalisation and a loss of its distinctive identity. For that very reason, though, it is difficult to know whether policy is influenced by their security interests or whether their views simply happen to coincide with the will of the Kremlin.

What one can say with some confidence is that so long as they do not challenge or embarrass the Kremlin, their political strength is manifest in the indulgence they are granted. This covers everything from the infamous level of corruption within these agencies, largely carried out with impunity, to high degrees of strategic and operational autonomy so long as Putin believes them to be delivering.

Putin’s Weakness?

But do they? Although in the main he appears to have considerable faith not only in their loyalty but also in their utility as an instrument of rule, responsible for everything from silencing dissent at home to managing war abroad, it may well be that in the bigger picture they actually represent a vulnerability.

Precisely because of the degree to which institutional and personal interests depend on presidential favour, and the current iteration of the Kremlin appears unwilling to hear hard truths, the intelligence community appears unwilling to tell them, too. In other words, although one of the key roles of intelligence services ought to be to tell policymakers their “best truth,” the Russian agencies now appear to have a particularly perverse incentive to reinforce Putin’s assumptions, not inform his worldview. When intelligence agencies become courtiers, they lose much of their value.

The return to favour of the GRU, for instance, has been ascribed in part by insiders to the willingness of its new director, Igor Sergun, to tailor his reports to Putin’s pref-

erences. Likewise, the decision-making processes behind a series of dangerous and under-considered recent adventures, from intervening in the Donbas to sending forces to Syria, are essentially opaque but seem to have excluded detailed consideration of the potential risks and the contra-indicative intelligence from the ground. This is, after all, a system lacking many of the checks and balances which Western countries have evolved to keep their intelligence agencies from tailoring their briefings to the convenience of the moment. The Security Council is essentially an administrative rather than policy body, agencies brief the president individually, and there is no independent national security advisor to help identify questionable findings. As a result, they may encourage Putin’s increasingly assertive and risk-taking policies abroad—policies which have left Russia mired in the Donbas, suffering under economic sanctions, and dangerously extended into Syria.

Secondly, their high tempo and often-aggressive operations, while potentially effective in tactical terms, may also prove strategically disadvantageous. They reinforce an outside world’s view that Russia is a dangerous, revisionist power unwilling to accept the norms of the international order. The kidnap by an FSB snatch squad of Estonian security officer Eston Kohver in 2014, for example, followed by his show trial on espionage and exchange for a convicted Russian spy in 2015, might be considered a tactical success, as it allowed Moscow to liberate one of their agents. However, this has to be set against the political costs of such a flagrant violation of the borders of a sovereign country and NATO member.

Finally, while Putin might regard the security agencies as his greatest supporters and the final backstop of his rule, generalized loyalty can often coexist with day-to-day self-interest. Many within these agencies are cynical opportunists, loyal to themselves to a degree that often undermines their value to the Russian state. They embezzle funds and engage in feuds which often interfere with their agencies’ activities. In Ukraine, for example, not only did the fall of President Yanukovich’s fall become an excuse for inter-agency point-scoring—according to pervasive rumour, SVR had to purge its relevant department for failing to predict it, at the FSB’s urging—but the FSB’s own local representatives in Donetsk and Lugansk appear to be rivals more than allies. Their arrogant and arbitrary ways not only undermine the legitimacy as well as the viability of the regime, if forced to choose between their own survival and prosperity and loyalty to Putin, there are no guarantees they will be willing to sacrifice the former in the name of the latter.

About the Author

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Analysis of the Signals and Assumptions Embedded in Russia's Adjusted Security Doctrines

Katri Pynnöniemi, Helsinki

Abstract

Russia has launched a process of updating some of its key national security documents. The updated military doctrine was approved in December 2014, followed by a new maritime doctrine a half-year later. The revision of the two doctrines has been explained in Russia with reference to the changing security situation and improvements in Russia's military capability. An analysis of the two documents reveals a diverging mix of signals and assumptions and perhaps most importantly, an emergence of a distinctive vocabulary that reflects Russia's current ambitions in world politics.

On 25 December 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved an updated military doctrine for the Russian Federation. The new document replaces the doctrine that was approved in 2010 during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. This is the fourth time that the Russian military doctrine has been adjusted since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The updated doctrine was prepared in a matter of months and its general structure and main ideas have remained largely the same.

The new version of the maritime doctrine was approved in August 2015, replacing the one from 2001. The revision of the two doctrines has been explained in Russia with reference to the changing security situation and improvements in Russia's military capability. The National Security Strategy that was originally approved during the Medvedev presidency in 2009 will also undergo revision as part of the general process of rewriting Russia's security and military policy.

An analysis of the two documents that have already been revised reveals an interesting mix of signals and assumptions. Distinguishing between these signals and assumptions, namely between what is intended as a message for Western audiences, and what is aimed at domestic constituencies respectively, and what can be regarded as a set of principles that guide Russian security-political thinking, is important in putting the two doctrines into perspective, and hence in enhancing our understanding of security-political thinking in Russia. In general, it can safely be assumed that the two documents do not provide a blueprint for Russia's future actions as such. Rather, the documents can be read as a resource for identifying key concepts and assumptions that constitute a background for decision-making. In addition, they provide an approximate indicator of developments in the military-technological and administrative spheres.

The Heightened Perception of Threats to the Current Regime

When it comes to signals, the most obvious one is the heightened perception of a threat towards the current

Russian regime. This is expressed in direct and indirect ways in both documents. Traditional references to NATO's eastern enlargement as posing a major threat to Russia's national security are repeated in both, and the tone of these references is sharper than before.

This traditional threat scenario is accompanied by a list of new challenges, most importantly the threat of a 'colour revolution' against Russia sponsored by the West. The adjusted military doctrine contains direct and indirect references to non-linear methods of warfare or, as the mainstream discussion in the West puts it, 'hybrid warfare'. The document explains that the intensification of the military threat towards Russia is due to the change in the nature of war, which has blurred the lines between internal and external threats. Although the overall conclusion has not been amended, the adjusted military doctrine frames the problem as being about the emergence of the new (cyber) domain of warfare that challenges the traditional understanding of borders, if not sovereignty per se:

It may be observed that military dangers and military threats are also entering the information space and moving inside the borders of the Russian Federation. In this context, even though the likelihood of a large-scale war against Russia using conventional or nuclear weapons has decreased, the military dangers facing Russia are growing.

The list of external and internal military threats identified in the document includes, for example, subversive activities by the special services and organisations in foreign states, and attempts to influence young people, thereby undermining patriotic upbringing and the military heritage, coupled with the operation of private foreign military companies 'in territories contiguous to the borders of the Russian Federation and its allies'. Although neither the concept of hybrid war, nor the concept of colour revolutions frequently used in Russian discourse are mentioned in the document, it can be concluded that these adjustments reflect a general understanding that the logic of security threats in and around Russia is changing. The fact that Rus-

sia has itself operationalized many of the 'dangers' listed above during the Crimean operation and subsequently in Eastern Ukraine should make this even more apparent.

The signals written into the adjusted military doctrine on new types of security threats are absent from the new maritime doctrine. Instead, the security environment is described with reference to priority regions including the Atlantic, the Arctic, the Pacific, the Caspian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Antarctic. The document provides a list of problems and opportunities with regard to each region. Although it is futile to scan the pages for references to such formulations as flow security or comprehensive security, the basic assumption put forward in the text is that infrastructures critical to the extraction and supply of natural resources are objects and subjects of national security. For example, the doctrine lists the further development of the Baltic pipeline system (namely the North Stream) and trade logistical systems as tasks to be implemented in the framework of state maritime policy in the Baltic direction. In the Arctic region, the development of the Northern Sea Route is framed as a matter pertaining to the sustainable development and security of the country. This phrase demonstrates the mixed character of the maritime doctrine: it is intended as a blueprint for the re-building of technological and administrative capabilities for the extraction of natural resources, while at the same time underlining Russia's intention to protect these resources by all available means, including military force.

The Underlying Assumption of a System Malfunction

At the meta-level, namely at the level of assumptions underlying security policy, the two documents have much in common. Although the maritime doctrine reads more like a list of concrete development needs than a conceptually-oriented description of Russia's ambitions, in both instances Russia's security dilemma is described as concerning a *malfunction of the international system*. From the Russian perspective, this system and its operational logic rest upon traditional great-power politics, although it is acknowledged that the new centres of economic growth challenge the existing redistribution of power within the international system. The description of the global security environment (paragraphs 9-11 in the military doctrine) argues that:

Currently, world development is characterized by increasing global competition, tension in the various areas of interstate and interregional interaction, rivalry between different values and development models, global and regional instability in economic and political development, against the background of international relationships becoming more difficult in general. A gradual redistribution of power in favour of new centres of economic growth and political attraction is taking place.

In the contemporary Russian foreign and security-political parlance, reference is frequently made to competition between different value systems and development models. In this connection it is claimed that Russia represents an original and, most importantly, a development model distinct from the West. For those familiar with Russian philosophical-historical thinking, there is nothing new in this type of argumentation. Although a special vocabulary has been developed to describe Russia's originality, including such slogans as 'Russian World', used to legitimize Russia's interference in the politics of neighbouring countries, or the notion of 'Eurasianism', which refers to Russia's special role between Europe and Asia, this language is used in a rather superficial way. In other words, the vocabulary does not constitute a rigid ideological system that would offer a Soviet-type alternative explanation of world affairs. For example, in the maritime doctrine, problems and challenges are described in terms of the international realist tradition as a struggle for natural resources and the projection of power. The Soviet-era concept of a 'correlation of forces', defined as the competition for economic, political, military and societal influence in the world, should perhaps be revised and applied in the current analyses.

At the same time, it should be remembered that the importance of democratic governance in the security-political context is by no means alien to the security political argumentation in Russia. In the military doctrine approved in April 2000 by the then newly-elected President Putin, it was stated that '[s]afeguarding the Russian Federation's military security is the most important aspect of the state's activity'. According to the doctrine, this could be achieved by:

[B]uilding a democratic rule-of-law state, implementing socioeconomic reform, asserting the principles of equal partnership, mutually advantageous cooperation, and good-neighbourliness in international relations, consistently shaping an overall and comprehensive international security system, and preserving and strengthening universal peace.

Ten years later, in a document approved by President Dmitry Medvedev, the references to democratic governance and economic reform were removed. The underlying assumption at that time was that Russia had overcome the problems caused by the crisis in the political and socioeconomic system. Security policy was anchored to the further development of the armed forces, which would provide the ultimate security guarantee for Russia and could be used as a tool to prevent the unfolding of potential conflict situations.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned assumption of *system malfunction* as a general explanation for the current global security environment, it is possible to contextualize the often-repeated claim, also

made in the military doctrine, about the current international security architecture being unable to ‘provide equal security for all nations’. On the one hand, it is suggested that Russia should be a party to negotiating the new ‘rules of the game’ for the European, if not the global security architecture. This argument has been put forward by Russia in connection with settling ‘the crisis’ in Ukraine, as Russia chooses to describe the situation. On the other hand, the insistence on ‘equal security’ is an indirect way to criticize the current US global position, although direct reference to ‘unipolarism’ is avoided, at least in the most recent official documents.

Conclusion: Consolidation of Double-Speak as a Part of Policy

To conclude, it should be noted that although both of the analyzed documents, and the military doctrine in particular, identify a long list of threats to Russia’s national security, the variety of means identified to counter them is rather limited. This is due to two factors. First, the underlying assumption at the meta-level of a *system malfunction* in Russian thinking means that the system can be fixed only through great-power negotiations backed by brute force. Second, the current sentiments in Rus-

sian society—the rise of nationalism and exaggeration of the external aggression (expressed with reference to Russia as a ‘besieged fortress’)—contribute to an understanding whereby Russian national security is seen as equating to the country’s military power.

What should be noted, however, is that the adjusted military doctrine invigorates the so-called double-speak system that flourished during the Soviet era. Russian researcher Vasily Gatov recently referred to it as ‘Stalinist diplospeak’, which uses carefully coded words and sentiments to mislead and deceive both the domestic and foreign audience. For example, the adjusted military doctrine refers to the growth of territorial disputes and separatism in *other parts of the world* while at the same time identifying the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as subjects of international relations. The current double-speak vocabulary is a far cry from its Soviet counterpart and the military doctrine is only one example of its many uses. Yet its emergence to such an extent should be noted—even if it can be construed as nothing more than a sign of Russia’s ambitions to change the way in which we talk about Russia in general, and the emerging and existing security threats in particular.

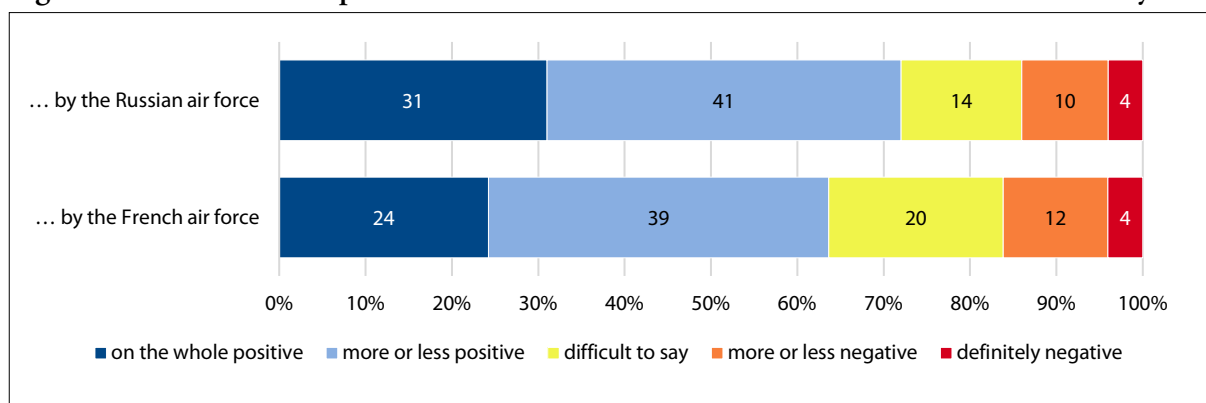
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OPINION POLL

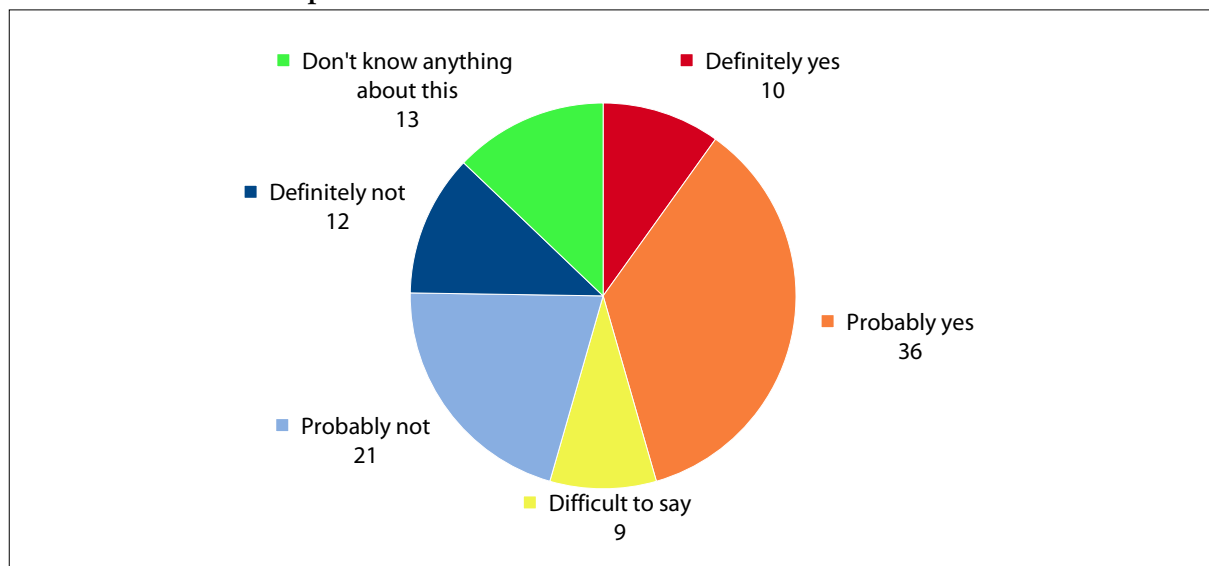
Russian Attitudes on Russia’s Intervention in Syria

Figure 1: What Is Your Opinion About the Strikes on Positions of the “Islamic State” in Syria ...



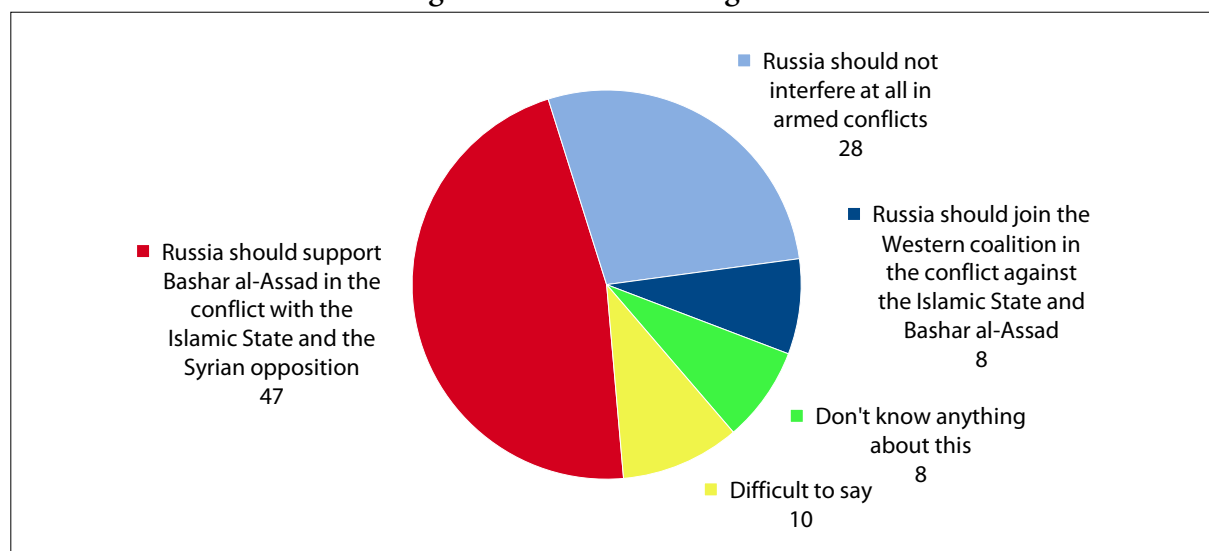
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 2–5 October 2015, *N* = 1600 <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskomu-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015

Figure 2: Do You Support the Decision of the Council of the Federation to Permit the Use of Russian Troops Abroad?



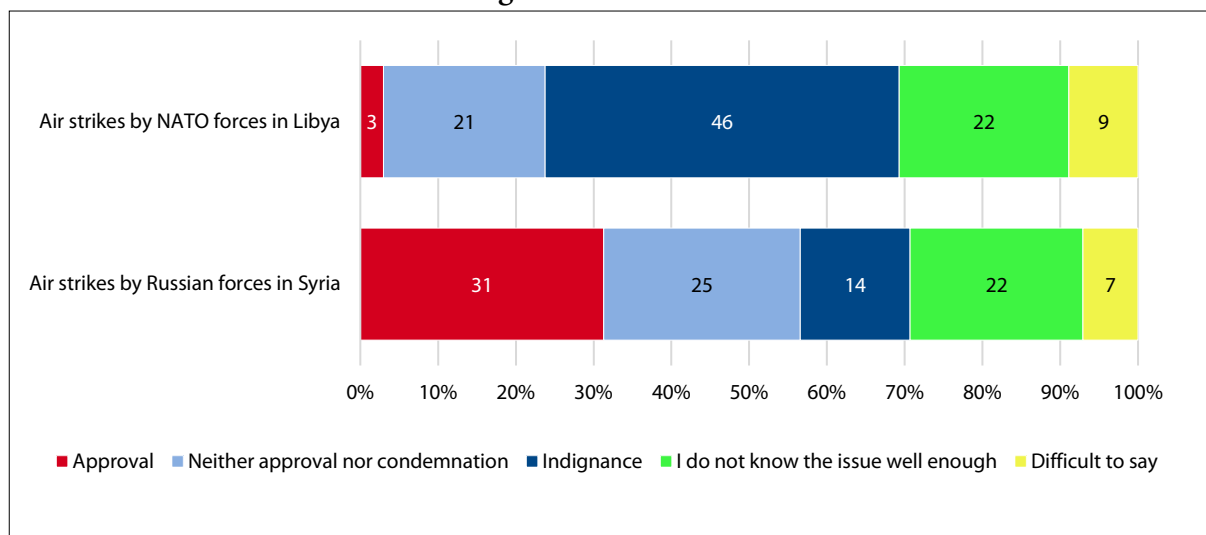
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 2–5 October 2015, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskomu-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015

Figure 3: Recently, It Was Reported That the Russian Air Force Began Bombing in Syria. With Which of the Following Statements Do You Agree Most of All?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 2–5 October 2015, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskomu-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015

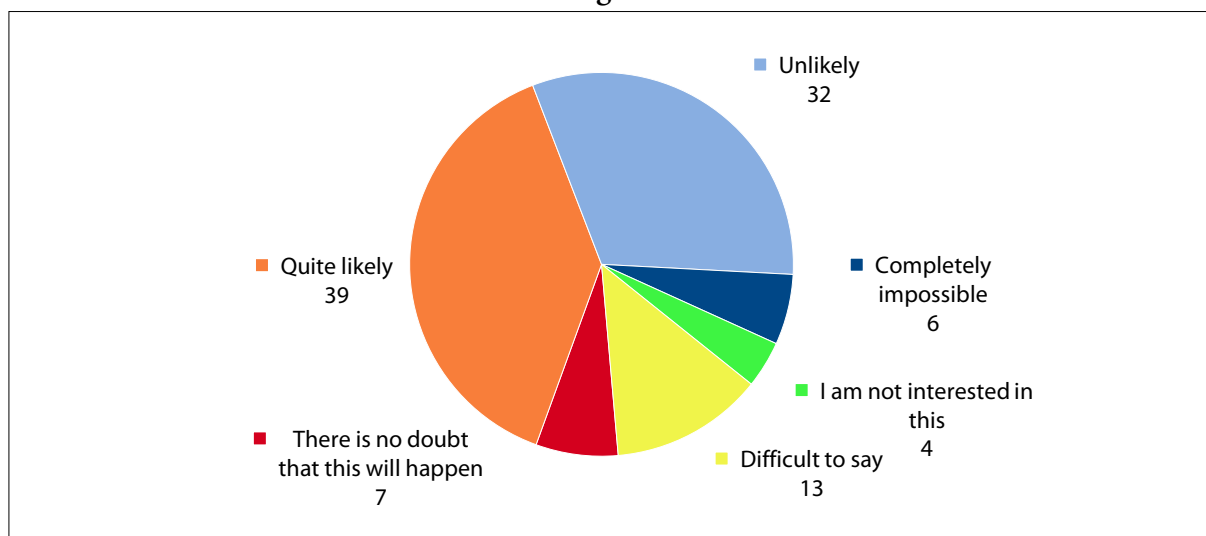
Figure 4: What Are Your Feelings Towards the Air Strikes by Russian Forces on Positions of the Islamic State in Syria: Approval; Indignance; Neither Approval Nor Condemnation; Or You Do Not Know Enough About the Issue To Have a Definite Attitude?*



* The question asked in the 2011 poll on air strikes in Libya was worded as follows: “What are your feelings concerning NATO air strikes on military targets and Gaddafi’s troops in Libya?”

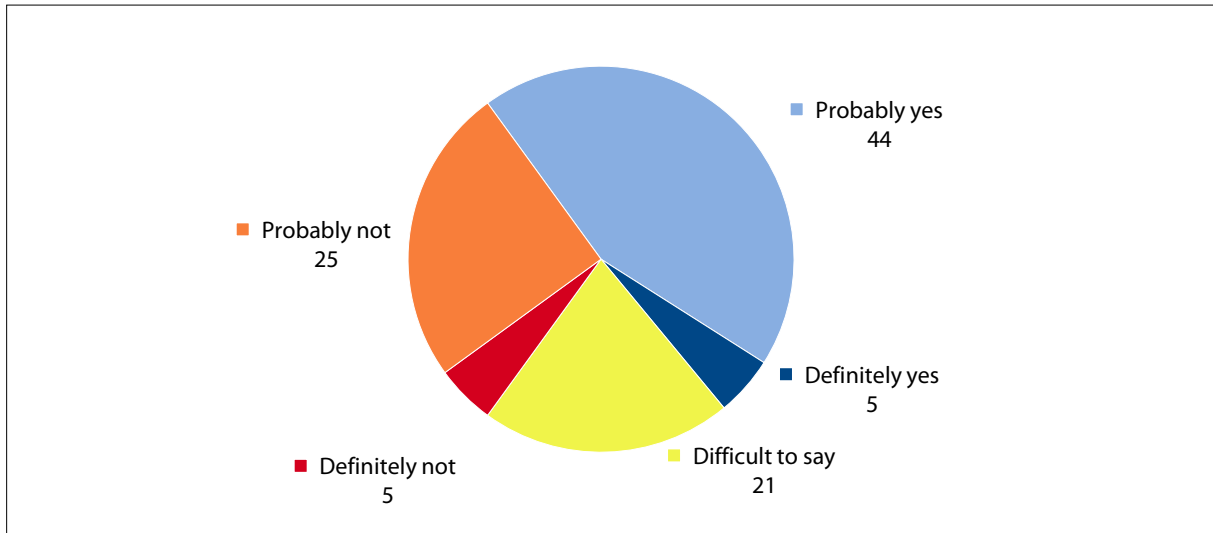
Sources: representative opinion polls by Levada Center: 2–5 October 2015, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskomu-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015; and 15–18 April 2011, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/18-05-2011/rossiyane-o-bombardirovkakh-livii-i-operatsii-v-irake-2003>>, published on 18 May 2011

Figure 5: What Do You Think, Is It Possible That Russia’s Armed Intervention in the Syrian Conflict Will Turn Into a “New” Afghanistan for Russia?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 2–5 October 2015, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskomu-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015

Figure 6: What Do You Think, Will the United States and the Countries of the West, on the One Hand, And Russia and the Present Leadership of Syria, on the Other Hand, Be Able to Find Common Ground on the Issue of a Settlement of the Conflict in Syria?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 2–5 October 2015, $N = 1600$ <<http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/udary-po-islamskom-gosudarstvu-podderzhali-72-grazhdan>>, published on 8 October 2015

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (<www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University, and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (<www.laenderanalysen.de/russland/>), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (<www.css.ethz.ch/publications/RAD_EN>), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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